UNIT 21 GANDHIAN SOCIAL REFORM : BHOODAN MOVEMENT

Structure

21.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to make you familiar with the Bhoodan movement (as a Gandhian social reform). After reading this unit, you should be able to:
- Explain the concepts of Constructive Programme and Sarvodaya
- Understand the Bhoodan Movement and
- Know the limitations of the Bhoodan Movement

21.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi is an original thinker of India. Gandhi's thinking of spouse maturity in the process of the evolutions of his political career. His South African experience adds a moral dimension to his thinking. He opposed the racialism imposed by the white minority on a moral plane. He got the support of all classes and castes from the Indian community. Gandhian moral tone has a political meaning. He could create an imagined community in South Africa despite their caste and class differences. The South African experience helped Gandhi to have a better insight into the Indian reality. Furthermore, he found that a section of Indian people facing social discrimination on the plane of caste remained outside the Hindu fold. Gandhi's touch with rural India makes his thinking more complex but closer to the Indian reality.

After coming back to India, Gandhi was asked by the Congress Party to look into the problems of the peasants at Champaran. Peasants in Champaran District of Bihar were leading a movement against the white planters. They wanted some outside intervention to strengthen their cause. They went to the Congress session at Lucknow and requested the leadership to send somebody to have a on the sport enquiry. Gandhi was deputed by the Congress Party to accompany them to Champaran. Gandhi made an independent study of the economic conditions of the peasants, although he became a member of the Enquiry Committee constituted by the colonial administration for suggesting reliefs. Gandhi's penetrative mind could perceive the multilayered complex reality existing in the countryside. His trip to Champaran was highly educative.

At the time of the Champaran movement, a popular peasant movement was going on in his home state Gujarat. The peasant movement in Kheda was organised on the

issue of paying high tax to the state. It was led by the dominant caste of the locality. The Patidar Association consisting of the rich and middle peasants were the active members of the movement. As the movement was against the Government but not against the local elite. It succeeded to some extent. But Gandhi felt very much disturbed over the result—that he could not do anything for the rural poor and low caste people. From the two experiments, he learnt the lesson that without active participation of the poor and socially backward, no popular movement would yield a result. Gandhi devised an intelligent plan of social reconstruction programme bassed on the abolition of untouchability and khadi. This programme would result in the involvement of the upper caste rich which in turn would expose them to the multilayered social reality. The net result would be that the elite would learn from their experience regarding the poor. Once they became conscious of the plight of the poor, they would do something for them. Moreover, Gandhi was convinced of the fact that without active cooperation of the elite, no plan of social engineering would succeed. Creating an integrated imagined community on a moral plane would help in accelerating social change.

21.2 CONCEPT OFCONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME

Gandhi exprimented with his constructive programme at the time of the non-cooperation movement in 1921. Gandhi wanted that the Congress accept his programme and only then was he inclined to launch the mass movement. Involvement in the social reconstruction programme would help an ordinary Congress worker to keep in touch with ground reality.

The Congress Party accepted Gandhi's social reconstruction Programme as their programme. Non-cooperation movement was launched at the time when Indian Society was confronted with a lot of social turmoil. In reality, the non-cooperation movement combined multiple social and political movements within it. It was infact the first mass movement organised on an all India level. Gandhi emerged as the leader of mass politics in India, where people of all castes and all classes participated. Participation in the mass movement became an educative experience for a Congress worker.

Non-cooperation movement continued for a period of about one year which threw up many political leaders from different regions. Gandhi encouraged the Congress workers in the social-reconstruction programme when there was no mass politics. This kept the Congress workers with in the fold of social reconstruction programme. Participation in the great social experiment kept the Congress workers busy. Gandhi was called by some local Congress leaders at Bardoli to lead another peasant movement on the issue of rent. The no rent campaign continued under the personal supervision of Gandhi, although he did not actively lead the movement. Moreover, Bardoli was a part of raiyatwari region where there was no middleman between the state and tenants. It was easier on the part of the **raiyats** (tenants) to lead the movement against the Government. The leadership of the movement remained in the hands of the Patidar Community, but Gandhi succeeded in motivating them to involve themselves in his social reconstruction programme. Upper caste people went to the Harijan Bastis and worked for the abolition of untouchability. In the beginning, they showed a lot of inhibitions in mixing with the Harijans, but slowly made it a part of their everyday lives.

Gandhi personally felt satisfied with the result of the Bardoli movement, although the movement perhaps succeeded only in an economic sense. It was followed by the Civil Disobedience movement which is the second mass movement on an all India plane. This movement drew rural masses to politics. The Civil Disobedience movement comprised a large number of no-tax movements. Most prominent of those were in UP and Andhra, where the leaders of the movement followed Gandhian lines by combining social and economic issues together.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : i): Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What do you know of Gandhi's Social Reconstruction Programme?

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21.3 CONCEPT OF SARVODAYA

The social base of the non-cooperation movement was reasonably different from that of the Civil Disobedience Movement. More and more backward castes went into the vortex of mass politics. The 1942 movement is a step ahead in the history of mass politics. Backward castes and rural masses remained active in the 1942 movement. With the radicalisation of mass politics, Gandhi's own ideas got radicalised. He started building his own vision about future India. He wanted to create a radical alternative to liberal democracy wherein the poor and the backwards would have a bigger say. All the mass movements working on Gandhian lines have a moral tone. Gandhian politics is an interplay of caste, class and community. In Gandhian mass politics, there are two interrelated phases: (i) Active politics in the Gandhian sense of masses taking to the street and involving themselves in the movement with an objective and (ii) Passive politics when political workers get involved in the social reconstruction programme. As a thinking personality, Gandhi remained dynamic taking the learning process quite seriously. In the process, he created his own world-view which is popularly known as *Sarvodaya*. Gandhi's articles on Sarvodaya remain scattered. Moreover, in his life time he never put them in a coherant manner. The intellectual heritage of Gandhi carries contradictory tendencies. One part is centred on power politics and party politics; the other part is the one interpreted by Vinoba Bhave, who was a close follower of Gandhi. In reality, both these parts functioned in a complementary manner. In the first decade after independence, above groups representing both the tendencies openly cooperated with each other. This was the decade of construction in the India's history. When the state under the Congress government built many industries and planned projects for the people. These who did not remain in power went to the villages with an objective to reconstruct rural India. Their is known as the 'Bhoodan Movement' which got a lot of moral and political support from the Indian State.

21.3.1 Meaning of Sarvodaya

Here one has to explain in some detail the concept of Sarvodaya which has economic and political dimensions. To make it operational, Vinoba Bhave expanded Gandhi's thought, some details of which you will read in the next unit. Gandhi evolved a concept of trusteeship in economics. Regarding the level of production, everybody has a right to produce unlimited wealth, but on the level of consumption, one has a restricted right. In other words, he is the owner of his wealth in a nominal sense but in reality, a trustee of it. While he is consuming, he must relate his needs to his poor neighbours. All have a right to food, clothing and shelter. Where the minimum demands of people were not satisfied, Gandhi advised them to rebell peacefully against the rich. No non-violent society can be built where the gap between the poor and rich is very wide. This is because a non-violent social order has very little space for exploitation of man over man. Gandhi's economic thought is based on distributive justice.

21.3.2 Role of Technology

Gandhi's economic thought has a technological dimension. The technological level of a society has a close relationship with the economic growth of a society which provides full employment. In the name of advancing technology, one cannot create unemployment. Technology must serve the needs of the people and not rule over them—something which breeds only alienation. To create a harmonious society, full employment is a necessary condition, because unemployment and alienation create

frustration and psychology of anger which in turn goes against the needs of a non-violent society.

21.3.3 Concept of Rural Development

Gandhi's economic thought is related largely to rural development. According to him, village society was the soul of India. Industrialisation and urbanisation should not destroy the village economy. Moreover, Gandhi's emphasis was on self-sufficiency of the village society. Agricultural economy and allied agro-industries must take care of the needs of the village people. If they have a minimum surplus, they can provide to the urban society. But they should not depend on the urban society for satisfying their minimum needs.

21.3.4 Vinoba's Concept of Sarvodaya

Vinoba Bhave developed Gandhi's economic thought in a more practical sense. Vinoba Bhave was concerned about creating a Sarvodaya society in rural India. This could not be based on unequal distribution of land. Concentration of land in the hands of few creates a basis for rural violence. Rural rich must participate in voluntary distribution of land. Bhoodan means land gift. According to Bhoodan's philosophy, the rich must be persuaded to participate in the process of land gift. Vinoba Bhave went on foot from village to village and propagated the Movement. He advised each rich man in the village to think of him as a son. In other words "if he has one son, then take him (Bhave) as the second son. If he has two sons, then take him as the third son". Vinoba pleaded with each landed man to share a portion of one's land as Bhoodan.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Discuss Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha.

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21.4 BHOODAN MOVEMENT

The leadership of the Bhoodan Movement fell on Vinoba Bhave who was taken by people as a **'Saint'**. He moved from village to village and propagated the gospels of Sarvodaya. The movement started in 1951 when Telengana peasant movement on the land question reached peak. It was a violent struggle launched by poor peasants against the local landlords. Vinoba looked into the problem and came out with a novel solution, viz., the landlords' voluntary gift of land would help in solving the problems of landlessness in India. This would pave the way for a non-violent radical solution born out of love and not out of hatred. In village Pochampali, in Telangana District one Ram Chandra Reddy created history by donating 100 acres of land to Vinoba in response to his appeal.

21.4.1 Concept of Gramdan

The initial objective of the movement was to secure voluntary donations of land and distribute it to the landless. However, the movement soon came out with a demand for 1/6th share of land from all land owners. In 1952, the movement had widened the concept of **Gramdan** (village-in-gift) and had strated advocating commercial ownership of land. The first village to come under Gramdan was Mangroth in

Hamirpur District of U.P. It took more than three years to get another village in gift. The second and third **Gramdans** took place in Orissa and the movement started spreading with emphasis on securing villages in gift.

The process of Gramdan starts with an awakening of social consciousness among the villagers (**Gram Bhavana**). This is to be followed by an oath to accept the **gramdan** way of life. In result it will generate **Lok Shakti** (Peoples' Power).

A village should take three steps before it earns the title of a gramdan village. These are : (a) The villagers who opt for gramdan should agree to transfer the title deeds of all their land in favour of a legally constituted village assembly (Gram Sabha) : (b) that the village assembly should be constituted before hand and (c) of a village fund meant for social welfare measures and economic development should be created. Once these conditions are fulfilled, the reconstruction of the gramdan village will start.

Though the notion of Gramdan emerged in 1952, the first systematic attempt to define it was made in 1957. If 80% of the land owners are prepared to give up their ownership of land, the village had to be considered as a **Gramdan.** Even if the landowners are ready to give up 51% of their total land, it is accepted as satisfying the laid down conditions. In 1965, the definition of Gramdan was further diluted to include the landowners who would give up only 1/20th of their land for distribution to the landless. The new arrangement was called **Sulabh Gramdan**. It was accepted at a time when the movement was in decline.

21.4.2 Role of Village Panchayat

The **Gramsabha** plays a crucial role in the **Gramdan** villages. This is a part of Gandhi's political planning for reconstructing the village society That village Panchayats should be the nucleus of Indian democracy. **Decentralisation of economic and political power** is the Gandhian blueprint. The Village Panchayat or the Gram Sabha is in charge of donating land to the landless. The Gramsabha is the administrative unit for allocating land and labour of the village people for community development. Savrodaya believes in gifting of everything that one has. A landless labourer can contribute labour to the village fund whereas the landlord can give land to it. Proper utilisation of scarce resources will help the cause of rural development. Even the Gramsabha has power to utilise the surplus labour in a productive manner. Weaving khadi is a part of the Sarvodaya village where village labour can engage themselves in a fruitful manner. Village industries are not confined to the weaving of khadi. Small scale industries are allowed to function at the village level. In other words, it is not only rational utilisation of labour but also making the village economy more self-sufficient. Their dependence on the urban economy will further decline. Prosperity of the village economy is the key to India's prosperity.

21.4.3 Contribution of JP

Jaya Prakash Narain's joining with the Bhoodan Movement gave a momentum to it. J.P. was a hero of the 1942 movement who had an all India image because he was the leader of the Socialist Party. He did not get involved in power politics after independence. He was regarded as a saintly politician in the eyes of the public. J.P.'s popularity gave an impetus to the Bhoodan movement in Bihar. When the first annual Sarvodaya conference was held in the state at Chandil in 1953, J.P. gave a call for creating a Sarvodaya society by establishing a non-exploitive and just egalitarian socio-economic order. It is reported that many students from Allahabad and Calcutta who attended the conference quit universities and colleges to join the movement. Most of the land gift came from Bihar, the target to collect two and a half million acres of land gift within a year got transcended.

21.4.4 Role of Private Property

The Bhoodan movement touched the most sensitive institution of private property and the need for its redistribution. Property in the form of land got questioned by the movement. That land is a gift of God and it should be utilised by all living beings became a common thinking in the Sarvodaya circle.

21.4.5 Role of Organisation

On the level of organisation, the Sarva Seva Sangh was the highest body in the Bhoodan movement. Those who were associated with various constructive work

organisations inspired and initiated by Gandhi formed themselves into an organisation which has come to be known as the Sarva Seva Sangh. The Sarva Seva Sangh was described by Vinoba as "an all Indian institution o experts for planning and executing programmes". The members at the village level formed the Bhoodan Yojna Committee which was incharge of collection of land and its distribution. This was controlled by the Sarva Seva Sangh. The Bhoodan movement was inspired by the anti-property ideology. It affected the interests of the landed elite in a locality. Gramdan villages became a threat to the landed elite. They started opposing the movement and some of them demanded back their land given as Bhoodan. They successfully sabotaged the programme.

21.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE MOVEMENT

Moreover, the movement was inspired by the Gandhian workers under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave and J.P. They did not strengthen the organisation. In early 1970s when there was conflict between Vinoba and J.P., the Sarva Seva Sangh split vertically. Moreover, that idealism could not sustain for a long period. Also, organisationally it remained an authoritarian structure. There was hardly any democratic discussion within the organisation on the issues affecting the organisation.

The Bhoodan movement could not inculcate democratic values at the village level. On the contrary, it reinforced the old values of Patron-Client relations. There were no popular movements from below on the land question. They appealed to the conscience of the landlords for donating land. This created situations when the landlords started demanding back their land.

In the end, however, it should be said that the Bhoodan movement was a novel experiment started on the Indian soil. It created a new awareness among people. It aimed at creating an egalitarian society. Gandhi's framework of social change brought the issue to the surface. It was realised by one and all that land distribution can not be tackled by the laws of the state alone.

Check Your Progress 3

Note : i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1) How did the Bhoodan movement come about?

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2) Briefly discuss the concept of Gramdan.

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3) What was JP's contribution to the Bhoodan Movement?

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21.6 LET US SUM UP

Bhoodan movement was inspired by Gandhian philosophy. Its main propounders were Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan (JP). Vinobha Bhave developed Gandhi's economic thought in a more practical sense. It meant that land should not be concentrated in few hands. The rural rich should volunteer to give some part of their land to the landless. This movement was started by Vinobha Bhave to dilute the anger of the peasants against the landlords which found expression in the Telengana movement. Due to the conflict between Vinobha Bhave and JP, the movement split in the early 1970s. This movement could not generate the democratic values in the villages. Instead, it foistered the old feudal values. However, the movement had created a sense of awareness among the people about the Gandhian framework of social change.

21.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Ramashray Roy, (ed.) *Contemporary Crisis and Gandhi* (Delhi, 1986)

Parth N. Mukherjee, *"Sarvodaya after Gandhi : Contradictions and Change"* in Roy, R. op. cit.

T.K. Oommen, *Charisma, Stability and Change : An Analysis of Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement in India* (New Delhi, 1972).

21.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1
See Section 21.2

Check Your Progress 2
See Section 21.3 and all the sub sections here

Check Your Progress 3
See Section 21.4 and all the sub sections here